



Feature Article  
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## Uzbekistan: A New Model for Reform in the Muslim World?

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**D**ramatic and important changes are taking place in Central Asia. For more than a year the region's historic core and geopolitical focal point has been immersed in a whirlwind of reform without precedent in the region. At a time when one-man rule has been reinforced in China and Russia, when the rule of law is in abeyance in countries as diverse as South Africa and Venezuela, and when most Muslim majority societies appear to be receding into a new authoritarianism informed by religious ideology, Uzbekistan has instituted reforms that are ambitious in aim and extensive in scope.

It is far too early to say how it will all come out, or even how far it will go. But there is little doubt that the current reforms are all



*President Shavkat Mirziyoyev*

organized around solid commitment to the rule of law, the rights of citizens, elective governance, an open market economy, religious tolerance, cordial relations with the great powers without sacrificing sovereignty, and a new embrace of the Central Asian region itself as an actor on the world stage. It's time for the world to take stock of this startling development.

To the extent it has been acknowledged at all by the world's press and punditry, the reform movement in Uzbekistan has been presented as a personal project of Uzbekistan's new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who was elected in December, 2016, after the death the country's founding president, Islam Karimov. This is entirely appropriate, for it is the torrent of speeches, papers, manifestos, and declarations by this restless leader that have taken the brakes off change in the country. Having served for thirteen years as Prime Minister and as Karimov's eyes and ears across the land, Mirziyoyev, as they say, "knows where the bodies are." Few recent leaders have come to power with a deeper knowledge of how things actually work in his country, as opposed to how bureaucrats in the capital think they do. Yet to a greater extent than has been acknowledged even within the country, the transformations unfolding today in Uzbekistan have roots in the late Karimov years, and have emerged in the light only after many years of preparatory legislation.

It is telling that Mirziyoyev did not wait to be elected before unleashing the first thrust of the reform movement. During the electoral campaign, which he was bound to win by a landslide on account of his long visibility before the public, he caught the public's eye by boldly announcing that he would make Uzbekistan's currency, the som, fully convertible and that he would free Uzbek businessmen to enter into partnerships abroad and *vice versa*. In an effort at protectionism, the *som* had been

unconvertible and then only semi-convertible for a quarter century, which drastically curtailed both international and national economic activity. Now the black market in currency vanished overnight amidst a smooth transition.

Karimov's economic strategy in the 1990s had been gradualistic and extremely cautious. He used abundant profits from state cotton sales to fund social services and instituted small-scale privatization. Rejecting "shock therapy" reforms advocated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank and instead instituting tight currency controls, Uzbekistan managed to regain pre-1991 levels of gross output and become, for a while, the best-performing of all Soviet successor states. The price of this, however, was unbounded protectionism, a burgeoning black market, flourishing corruption, a throttled investment climate, and the emigration of millions of unemployed farm workers.

Despite shortcomings, by 2016 the economy was productive and stable; the World Bank had even named it among the world's "top improvers" in 2015. To be sure, economists at the International Monetary Fund pointed out that the Uzbek economic model had run its course and was beginning to flounder, but it retained enough strength to provide a stable platform from which the newly elected president could launch reforms affecting both the domestic economy and international investments. None were inventions of the moment: all had been worked out during his years as Prime Minister.

In February, 2017, Parliament promptly adopted Mirziyoyev's 2017-2021 National Development Strategy, which identified key areas affecting the economy, including privatization and general liberalization, lightening the bureaucracy's hand in the economy, and greater competition to spur the modernization of Uzbek agriculture and industry. Child labor in the cotton harvest – a Soviet legacy – had been abolished before the transition, but Mirziyoyev also stopped educators and health workers from being dragooned to work the cotton harvest and took steps towards the mechanization of this sector.

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Economic reform has not stopped at the border. Key ministers, and the President himself, visited all Uzbekistan's Central Asian neighbors, including Afghanistan, in a campaign to resolve outstanding problems and open channels of trade. Follow-on steps have included speeding border crossings, improving intra-regional transportation infrastructure, region-wide discussions on the economically critical issue of water management, and the reopening of direct flights between Central Asian capitals.

All these measures, along with the loosening of currency and exchange controls, have earned plaudits from the World Bank, IMF and other international financial institutions. More important, they have had an immediate effect on the economy itself. Exports in 2017 increased by

15% and the country's businessmen signed new deals worth \$11 billion. Trade with Kazakhstan grew by 31% and with Tajikistan by 20%. Trade delegations from all the major world economies are descending on Tashkent and Uzbek businessmen are fast emerging from their national shell.

In spite of these advances, the centralized management and pricing system remains in place, with predictable effects, for example, on the cost of fuel. There has been a deep bow to market mechanisms but the myriad of bureaucratic impediments to their operation have yet to be successfully hacked back. And, as is always

the case with rapid changes introduced from above, old habits die hard.

Particularly harmful to both economic growth and the country's civic culture was Uzbekistan's unreformed and highly statist legal system, which maintained large elements inherited from Soviet times. These were deeply rooted not only in the law itself but in the entire court system, the penal system, and in the training of all law-related posts in the Ministries of Justice, Internal Affairs, etc. Western governments and numerous international bodies had long criticized this state of affairs and, when Uzbekistan seemed unresponsive to their complaints, ostracized the country. Specific incidents involving courts and penal system led many to view Uzbekistan as a legal pariah.

Mirziyoyev jolted the entire system by declaring at the outset that "It is time to end the period when people worked for the government. Instead, the government must start working for the people!" He opened up a "virtual office" accessible to all citizens and demanded that all central and local senior officials do the same. Governors and parliamentarians were cajoled into meeting with their constituents. Thousands of complaints flooded in and were duly documented; most were addressed. Public scrutiny resulted in the immediate firing of 562 officials from the Ministry of Finance; a senior official was fined for vulgarly insulting a citizen, something hitherto unheard of in the region. These moves put officials at all levels of government on notice and confirmed that the new administration is serious about its pledge to make government accountable to the people.

As early as October, 2016, Mirziyoyev announced his intention to reform the judicial system and strengthen the protection of rights and freedoms. He called for the review of more than 700 legal acts spread over more than 90,000 pages. A tide of Presidential Decrees then followed. In January, 2017, he introduced measures to make the judiciary independent, increase the authority of the courts, and democratize and improve the judicial system on the basis of the best international practices. Also included were decrees guaranteeing the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms; improving administrative, criminal, civil, and commercial law; and fighting crime, including anticorruption measures. Overall, his stated goal was to strengthen the rule of law and build

public trust in the legal system through communication with the public and media. A new Anticorruption Law entered into force in early January, 2017, and was followed by a state anticorruption program.

In order to rout out the old system, reformers turned to restructure Uzbekistan's legal education. A Presidential decree of April, 2017, updated the syllabus at the Tashkent State University of Law and abandoned the old lecture-based approach in favor of experiential learning. The University proceeded to hire many young professionals, many with foreign degrees. Now the University's ambition is to become a regional hub for legal studies in Central Asia. Along with these reforms, the Supreme Court is preparing to establish an Academy to train judges, candidates for judgeships, and other court personnel.

Uzbeks and foreign observers knew full well that none of these advances could be achieved if the all-powerful Minister of National Security continued to wield repressive and retaliatory power over virtually the entire legal system. Since 1995 Rustam Inoyatov had headed this all-powerful agency, which he used to whip into line other ministries, including Justice and Internal Affairs. The European Union blacklisted Inoyatov but he was long considered untouchable. When Mirziyoyev retired him on January 31, 2018 – after publicly denouncing the agency's excesses – it sent a shock throughout the society. He similarly removed the long-serving General Prosecutor, and instituted changes at the Procuracy, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Police

Academy, including naming new senior staffs whose members are committed to reform. Of course, the mere appointment of such persons is no guarantee that they will prevail against the prevailing culture of corruption at both the national and provincial levels. But for the first time, the system is tilted towards change and reform, not perpetuation of the status quo.

The tumult of reform in Uzbekistan is to some extent a youth movement. Back in the 1990s, Karimov sent tens of thousands of young Uzbeks to study abroad, in the full knowledge that they would

come back with ideas very different from those of his own generation. Now these young men and women are emerging as ministers and deputy ministers. They are radically transforming the way government communicates within itself and with the citizenry. Mirziyoyev has added a State Advisor on Youth to his cabinet.

The young reformers have their work cut out for them. For example, tight state controls over the licensing of defense counsels ensured that these critically important officers of the court would remain weak. Until this changes, neither Uzbeks nor their foreign partners can be confident that justice will be served. This will involve extensive changes in laws, regulations, and training, all urgently important tasks that are only now being undertaken. Beyond this, Uzbekistan still ranks low in many of the key global indexes of

corruption and governmental openness. Improvements will not come easily.

Where did these substantial changes come from? At first glance, they seem to have appeared out of a clear blue sky. This view is reinforced by the fact that they are most fully enumerated in two

documents, both dating to 2017. In January, Mirziyoyev issued a comprehensive "Five Point Development Strategy Plan" outlining priorities for the coming five-year period. This focused on improving the system of state governance; strengthening the rule of law and the judicial system;

developing and liberalizing the economy; developing the social sphere; and improving security by improving relations with regional neighbors and world powers. Then, speaking to a joint session of parliament in December, the President challenged parliament to reform civil service law, and to delineate the functions of executive bodies. He also assailed bureaucratic influence over economic life and called for the economy to be guided by market mechanisms. Further, he proposed removing domestic checkpoints and speeding border crossing.

However, though barely known at home and almost fully undetected abroad, these and other reforms had been brewing in Tashkent for more than a decade before the death of Karimov. Back in 2005, Washington was blackballing Uzbekistan for killings in Andijan triggered by an uprising of heavily armed militants (whom the State Department and

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activist organizations erroneously characterized as “peaceful Muslims). But already during that year, Uzbekistan adopted *habeas corpus* and abolished the death penalty. Subsequent reforms introduced the separation of powers and strengthened the office of Ombudsman. By 2014-15, a major effort was underway at the Ministry of Justice to reorganize and improve the legal system. Again, the generational factor was important: younger officials had begun to take on greater responsibilities. Well before Karimov’s death, Uzbekistan began to overcome its prior aversion to the public discussion of important public issues. This is important, because it means current reforms may build on a stronger basis than is sometimes assumed, which is likely to make them more resilient.

It is one thing to document the torrent of reforms in present-day Uzbekistan but quite another to characterize the type of political order to which they will give rise. At the declaratory level, however, it is clear what President Mirziyoyev and his colleagues aspire to attain. In speech after speech, paper after paper, the new leadership reiterates such phrases as “increase political competition,” “invigorate civil society”, “develop a civic culture,” “expand transparency,” and “protect human rights.” It is doubtful that these noble phrases are being uttered today with greater frequency in any other country on earth.

Inevitably, the chief challenge is to lift the massive and heavy hand of the bureaucracy from civic life. Mirziyoyev’s method is simple: to unleash the public at large, elective bodies, and the media at all levels to control

bureaucratic caprice. Spelled out in the major documents mentioned above, the plan is to mobilize civic energy against the stifling state. Even if this succeeds, however, it will be necessary to reform the system of public administration (as well as its staffing and training) to make it capable of protecting the rights of citizens and bolstering Uzbekistan’s economic competitiveness. To this end, constitutional changes introduced in 2014 sought to redistribute power between the parliament and the executive, granting parliament more decision-making power and control over the executive. In August, 2017, President Mirziyoyev boldly proposed to have all governors and mayors directly elected by the people, rather than be appointed by the President. It is worth noting that, in stark contrast, the abolition of elected governors in Russia was the launching point for Putin’s new statism.

Direct local elections are a necessary but not sufficient condition for progress. The elections themselves must be conducted fairly. The existing District and Precinct Election Commissions are highly compromised and require reforms that should be closely monitored by independent and active non-governmental organizations. To this end, senior Uzbek officials have now done a *volte face*, hailing NGOs as a crucial ally in its reform effort and introducing numerous legislative initiatives to ease the ability of NGOs to operate. Since Mirziyoyev took office as Interim President in September, 2016, close to 700 local civic advocacy organizations have successfully

registered with the Ministry of Justice, an increase of more than eight percent.

The President has also pushed Parliament to take a more proactive role and to initiate and draft legislation, instead of merely rubber-stamping decrees emanating from the Presidential Office. As a result, parliamentarians now regularly visit rural areas, where they appear in live talk shows, use social media, and participate in focus groups. Less obvious is the encouragement Tashkent has given to political parties to deepen their organization and expand their activities. Indeed, President Mirziyoyev has even encouraged members of the five legally registered parties to open direct contacts with like-minded parties world-wide so as to learn from their experience. As a result, Uzbek parties are already defining their programs more carefully and designing platforms with an eye to expanding their electoral bases. There are clearly risks in such initiatives, in that they could lead to unpredictable results and to parties with more starkly oppositional programs. But for the time being Mirziyoyev and his colleagues seem comfortable with allowing such new freedoms.

Related to this declared new freedom is a willingness on the part of the government in Tashkent to engage openly with international concerns over Uzbekistan's human rights record. To this end Mirziyoyev extended an invitation to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to pay an official visit to the country and to open in Tashkent a permanent representative office. The government has also reached out to various western human rights organizations and lobby groups that had

heretofore been highly critical of Uzbekistan, and which have responded constructively.

No issue has called forth more controversy between Uzbekistan and the West than the fate of religion in the country. As recently as January, 2018, the U.S. Department of State labelled Uzbekistan one of ten "Countries of Particular Concern" on account of its alleged violations of religious freedom. Never mind that four months earlier, Tashkent had removed 16,000 of 17,000 people registered as religious radicals from its list, released many citizens who had been incarcerated in this connection, and invited many religious exiles back to the country, several with personal letters from the President. In the judgment of such critics, Uzbekistan was, and remains, inhospitable to unrecognized and dissident forms of Islam and other faiths and willing to suppress them by force when necessary.

This judgment simplifies and distorts a complex reality. While 90% of Uzbeks consider themselves Muslim, millions are quite secularized. Christians, Jews, and other faiths also flourish there. Nearly all Uzbek Muslims adhere to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, considered the most moderate in its acceptance of reason alongside faith as a basis for ethics. However, radical Salafis had begun to make their presence felt even prior to the collapse of the USSR, often with support from the Gulf States. Later, these armed extremists would supplant such support with funds gained from drug trafficking. In 1991, as the Soviet Union was collapsing, a band of armed extremists briefly seized the city of Namangan and

demanded that Uzbekistan become an Islamic state. These militants were forced out of the country, but eventually found refuge with the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. In 1999, now calling themselves the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, they tried to invade the country through Tajikistan after succeeding in exploding bombs in central Tashkent in a failed attempt to kill the president. Neighboring Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan were all contending with this wave of radical Islamism.

Uzbekistan's approach was to take a hard and uncompromising line against the extremists but to extend a cordial hand of cooperation to the country's Hanafi clerics and believers, who had deep roots in the society but had suffered heavily during the Soviet period. The government shunned non-traditional religious groups, and instituted tough sanctions against proselytizing. The resulting convictions generated considerable international attention.

Unfortunately, Western voices did not stop at condemning the methods used by Tashkent; they rejected wholesale what Uzbekistan was trying to achieve. Uzbek law insists on secularism in government, law, education, and the military. But it does not claim to be secular in the American sense of full separation of church and state. Instead, it combines a skepticism of the potential political role of organized religion similar to France's *laïcité* with an effort to restore traditional religious practices (specifically Hanafi Sunni Islam) to their dominant position in society.

President Mirziyoyev has reaffirmed this model, but taken it further. Feeling perhaps that Uzbekistan no longer faces an existential threat from extremist Islamism, he has focused less on defensive and more on positive steps. Thus, he has actively prioritized what he calls the country's distinctive tradition of "moderate" Hanafi Islam, and launched a national idea of "Enlightened Islam." Education remains strictly secular and school reforms call for increasing students' understanding of "the role of secular values and religious affairs in a secular society," at the same time placing great stress on tolerance, inter-faith dialogue, and comity. While Mirziyoyev served as Prime Minister, the Committee for Religious Affairs passed a law promoting cooperation among the different Islamic schools of law. More recently he has promoted the construction of small roadside mosques for the faithful and suggested competitions for Koranic recitation.

Beyond all this, by far the most important new direction respecting religion is Uzbekistan's fulsome embrace of the great Age of Enlightenment that flowered in Central Asia under Muslim rule between the eighth and twelfth centuries. Uzbeks and other Central Asians (including Afghans) have come to realize that many of the greatest achievements of Muslim science and learning were the work not of Arabs or Middle Easterners, but Central Asians who happened to write in Arabic and were mistakenly assumed to be Arabs. President Karimov convened a major international conference to proclaim this truth, while President Mirziyoyev is establishing an



international scientific research center on “Islamic learning” in Bukhara to study the Golden Age and promote “Enlightened Islam,” and an Islamic Civilization Center in Tashkent to interact with universities and schools.

By embracing this great age of achievement and giving it a contemporary institutional identity, Uzbekistan is laying the foundations of an important and unprecedented new direction and model for the Muslim world as a whole. Significantly, its Central Asian neighbors are fully part of this new direction in the world of Islam, and are promoting it through concrete actions of their own.

Since its emergence as an independent state in 1991, Uzbekistan, more than most countries in the post-Soviet space, has prioritized the preservation of sovereignty and independence and been willing to make costly sacrifices in other areas in order to limit its dependence on foreign actors. Under President Mirziyoyev it continues to adhere to such core principles as abstention from military alliances and from the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union; refusal to deploy Uzbek troops beyond its national territory or to host foreign military bases; and non-intervention in the internal affairs of foreign countries. These continuities are unsurprising, since many of the security challenges that faced the Karimov administration persist today – including transnational terrorism, underdeveloped

regional transportation infrastructure, and contested water rights.

It is telling that the first international initiative of the new administration in Tashkent was to focus on improving relations with its immediate neighbors in Central Asia. As post-colonial states, all five former Soviet states had spent a

quarter century defining their identities and interests, often in juxtaposition to those of their neighbors. Chilly personal relations among some of the new leaders did not help matters. Moscow’s one-hub transport system monopolized contact with the outer world and Afghanistan, a core part of

Central Asia for millennia, was viewed as an alien and hostile land rather than a potential window to the Indian Ocean.

Now all this is changing rapidly. Diplomats are successfully delineating contested borders, trans-border contacts and trade are expanding, mutual investments are being undertaken, and even joint power stations contemplated.

These initiatives from Tashkent have met a warm reception from all its neighbors. The positive regional mood to which this has given rise now allows Central Asians to undertake a major joint project to regularize the ultra-sensitive topic of regional water use and management. To assure the independence of this work from outside pressure, Tashkent has placed this purely regional initiative under the

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United Nations. In the same spirit, Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov convened in March 2018, a major regional conference to consider ways in which northern neighbors could actively assist in the economic and social development of Afghanistan. Implicit in both of these Uzbek initiatives is that Afghanistan henceforth is to be considered a *part* of central



*Presidents Mirziyoyev and Nazarbayev in Astana*

Asia and not merely an inconvenient neighbor.

Of signal importance is the fact that President Mirziyoyev, in collaboration with President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, initiated a meeting of the presidents of the five former Soviet states of the region, also held in March 2018. This departed from the practice of the last decade, when regional leaders had only met in the presence of foreign powers. Yet back in the 1990s, there existed a Central Asian cooperative mechanism that gave rise to joint projects in the

economy, education, and even security. It was so successful that Vladimir Putin asked to become an observer, then a member. Within two more years he had compelled its closure in favor of a new body, which eventually grew into the Eurasian Economic Union, controlled by Moscow.

Central Asian leaders now appear united in their aim to build greater regional coordination, and it is expected that Afghanistan will be asked to join future meetings. It is not yet clear what direction this new regionalism may take, but the Nordic Council and especially ASEAN are potentially valuable models that experts within the region are already studying carefully.

Even as Tashkent has recently sought to improve ties with its Central Asian neighbors and deepen relations with international institutions, it still strives for balanced and positive relations with all the major external powers including Russia, China, Europe, and the United States. President Mirziyoyev has traveled to Moscow, Beijing, and the United States in pursuit of business deals, diplomatic support, and security partnerships. However, even as Uzbekistan continues to deepen economic ties with Russia and China, it is clear that his administration's domestic reforms are designed above all to make the country a more attractive partner to the West and to advanced economies like India, Japan, and South Korea.

The welter of initiatives swirling out of Tashkent these days overwhelms insiders and exhausts everyone else. By any world measure, Uzbekistan is undergoing a broad-gauged process of overhaul and reform. Barely a year has passed since it went into high gear, so it is too early to prognosticate on chances for success. Nonetheless, it is worth noting some of the main vulnerabilities to which the reforms are subject, and also some of the positive factors that come into play.

On the downside, a declaration, resolution, or law is merely a statement of intent. There is a vast distance between cup and lip. Implementation will call for effective mobilization by thousands of administrators and civilians alike, few of whom are accustomed to taking initiative into their hands. Short of being cajoled or forced into action, those upon whose actions the success of reform depends are as likely as not to take a cautious course, keeping open all options until outcomes are more clear. This could dilute and then erode the reform movement as a whole. Until this changes, Uzbekistan's rankings in the major world indexes of doing business, transparency, and the rule of law will leave much to be desired.

Equally serious is the possible impact of Newton's Third Law of Motion, which holds that every action produces an equal and opposite reaction. Even though most Uzbeks seem for the time being to have embraced or at least accepted change, opposition is inevitable whenever there are losers as well as winners.

How the government handles the losers will be a major test of its human and governing skills.

On a deeper level, one must ask how well the Mirziyoyev reform program accords with the mentality and political culture of Uzbek society as it has come down through the centuries. Golden ages of achievement combine with centuries of decaying emirates, tsarist colonialism, and Soviet rule all play a role in this complex compound. Will Uzbeks succeed in *adopting* these strong measures, will they instead *adapt* them in some unexpected way, or will they ultimately reject them? The jury is out.

Down the road, Mirziyoyev will have to manage the expectations his reform agenda is inevitably creating at home and abroad. Georgia's experience may be relevant here. The dynamic Mikheil Saakashvili created expectations of rapid democratization that his government was unable to fulfill. Aggressive Russian efforts to undermine the country's stability complicated the process. At the very least, such experiences elsewhere should encourage foreign well-wishers of Uzbekistan's campaign to make the country's institutions more accountable to be steady and patient in their support. Real change will not take root overnight.

On the positive side of the ledger are a number of factors that augur well for the success of Mirziyoyev's grand experiment. As we have seen, the reforms did not spring suddenly out of Mirziyoyev's head like Athena out of the skull of Zeus. Most were subject to extensive discussion and even testing before their recent implementation. Moreover, they have not been

introduced amidst a deep crisis. Because the reforms have arisen in relatively good times, Alexis de Tocqueville's admonition that "the most critical moment for bad governments is the one which witnesses their first steps toward reform" may not apply.

Various soft or intangible factors may also come into play. Public support for the time being remains high. Besides, the oasis-based societies of Central Asia have, over the centuries, developed a high degree of self-discipline and communal cohesion that can counterbalance destabilizing factors. Of paramount importance is the fact that Shavkat Mirziyoyev is a driving and tenacious leader with ample energy to pursue the reforms to the end, and with strong support from a skilled cadre of rising young men and women.

This, then, is the base-line of reform in Uzbekistan, against which it will be possible to evaluate progress and regression in the coming days and years. The picture includes ample positive signs but also danger signals that bear close watching. What can be said with absolutely certainty, however, is that the outcome of the developments in Uzbekistan that are outlined above will bear directly not only on the entire region of Central Asia but, equally, on the sensitive geopolitics of Eurasia, and on the Muslim world as a whole. Their implications for the United States are therefore considerable.

Uzbekistan's foreign policy, complementing that of its neighbors, is bringing Central Asia together as a world region. The process has been proceeding apace since the fall of the USSR. The

establishment of a five-nation Nuclear Free Zone, the reopening of transport corridors, and regional consultations at the Presidential and other levels, all point in this direction. Kazakhstan proposes to lead in the financial area with the opening of its International Financial Center in Astana. The inclusion of Afghanistan in recent dialogues symbolizes the addition of that ancient land to the emerging geopolitical zone. The fate of Uzbekistan, at the region's geographical and historical center, will therefore decisively shape both the direction and extent and direction of the emerging regional.

The main thrust of the Uzbek reforms is towards openness, participation, and law-based citizenship, with government serving the public rather than the reverse.

Such ideals are by no means the norm in today's world. Many countries have devised self-serving explanations of why they cannot and should not move in this direction because to do so would violate their "values." If Uzbekistan succeeds to any significant degree it will become a laboratory of reform, its "best practices" to be studied and applied by other developing countries.

This is especially important within the Muslim world. Central Asia contains the largest concentration of Muslim nations governed by secular laws on earth. Far from being an outlier to a faith centered in the Middle East, it has equal claim – historical, theological, and intellectual – to being a Muslim heartland. Because of its development and mounting activism, it will necessarily impact Muslim

societies elsewhere. In short, reformed Uzbekistan holds the possibility of becoming a new model for the development of other Muslim societies.

The effervescence of reform in Uzbekistan today deserves the support of major powers. China declares itself comfortable with recent developments and so has Russia, at least for the time being. But its Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, has warned against what he claims are U.S. efforts to “exclude Russia” from Central Asia and could well decide, against better judgment, that Central Asia’s new regionalism is merely the West’s tool to be wielded against Moscow.

In reality, Uzbekistan’s reforms, and the revival of Central Asia to which they contribute so significantly, are not against any outside power and are compatible with all existing geopolitical

arrangements. They deserve support, assistance, and investments from America and Europe and other open societies, but not interference. Both America and Europe should encourage others to do the same.

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